

SPECIAL ED: State should require background checks of workers

March 14, 2005

Michigan law does not require criminal background checks on people who apply to work with special education students. It should.

Two bills, SB247 and HB4202, are pending to close this potentially dangerous gap in law. They merit action.

The fact that these workers have direct contact with perhaps the most vulnerable children ought to make them subject to the same level of background checks now required of teaching and administrative applicants.

The privacy concerns surrounding such checks are legitimate but must take a backseat to the larger concerns of protecting children.

That is not to say that everyone who has had a run-in with the law should be kept away from children. But school administrators must be aware of the record to evaluate its potential impact. Few applicants are likely to volunteer such information -- unless they know the checks are mandated.

There is certainly enough evidence to show that people with checkered pasts are slipping into the state's schools. A Michigan Department of Education audit done last September found 178 people, teachers and staff, who were working with children despite criminal convictions for everything from retail theft to criminal sexual assault and drugs.

The department now has a policy of conducting quarterly checks on newly certified teachers. Their names are matched against a list of state-convicted criminals.

It sure seems like common sense for the state to be as concerned about the people applying to work with special-needs children. In fact, one could argue that Lansing should require scrutiny of all school employees working closely with children.

For now though, lawmakers should seize this as opportunity to put a basic protection in place.

Copyright © 2005 Detroit Free Press Inc.

